



ALL INDIA RADIO AND THE SHAPING OF INDIA'S IDENTITY IN NEHRU'S YEARS: A THEMATIC EXPLORATION BASED ON READINGS OF INDIA AFTER GANDHI: THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

All India Radio (AIR) played a significant role in India's socio-political landscape during the struggle for independence and the post-independence era. As a medium that overcame literacy and geographic barriers, radio became essential for disseminating urgent and immediate messages, facilitating communication during the chaos of partition, and fostering national unity. This paper uses excerpts on radio from Ram Chandra Guha's book *India after Gandhi: The history of the world's largest democracy* to thematically engage with radio's connect with India's history. The themes include: (i) Bridging religious divides after Gandhi's assassination (ii) princely states and political propaganda (iii) Women victims of partition and radio as tool (iv) Civic Awareness and Democratic Participation (v) Foreign Affairs and India's Identity (vi) Communicating National Development (vii) A people's entertainments (viii) Cultural 'Reforms' and the Language Debate. These themes give glimpses of Nehru's years when radio gets passed on as a colonial legacy and then transforms to an extent to shape the identity of the nation while constantly engaging with debates of the times.

INTRODUCTION

In a country as diverse as India, with its many languages, cultures, and vast rural population, it is expected that radio emerged as a powerful tool for mass communication, especially after independence, when the medium was used to disseminate crucial information and foster a sense of national identity. Radio's ability to reach the remote corners of the country made it indispensable at a time when the country was witnessing political upheaval and transformation.

Radio's origins in India date back to the British colonial era, with the first radio broadcasts beginning in 1923. Initially limited to urban elites, radio quickly became a tool of mass mobilization during the freedom struggle. In the aftermath of independence, radio continued to play a pivotal role, not just in informing the public but in shaping the narrative of the new nation. From Gandhi's assassination to the trauma of Partition, and from electoral education to cultural reforms, radio was the pulse of a nation in transition.

This paper highlights the multiple roles that radio played in India's history, particularly during the first fifteen years when Nehru steered the country towards political and social change. By examining thematic areas such as nationalism, propaganda, women's protection, electoral democracy, foreign relations, and cultural reforms, this paper underscores radio's influence as a tool for political communication that led to the construction of the idea of India.

According to Guha (2007), radio emerged as a 'people's entertainment' (2007) as its popularity soared, evident from the rapid rise in radio set production—from a modest 3,000 in 1947 to 150,000 by 1956, in less than a decade. By 1962, AIR broadcast over a lakh hours annually from more than 30

stations, reaching nearly the entire subcontinent; only remote areas like jungles, mountains, and deserts remained out of reach, while many listeners tuned in together, enhancing its reach (Rao, 1986). Awasthy writes: The Hyderabad and Aurangabad Stations of the Nizam became a nuisance to the people and the Government of India when the British Government relinquished power in August 1947, and just before the final merger of the State of Hyderabad with the Union of India. After the Police Action the two stations came under the administrative control of the Government of India (pg.5, 1965). It is important to note here that in initial years of its existence, Hyderabad's indigenous broadcasting system, established by 1939 with a central station in Hyderabad and sub-stations serving regional languages, stood out for its vernacular focus and local management, contrasting with AIR's preoccupation with the Hindi-Urdu-Hindustani debate in northern stations (Gupta, 2023).

Post-independence, in the early days, the radio served as a low-cost medium of communication through which the government could address the Indian populace. Using the radio to communicate with the masses, however, meant that the government maintained a monopoly over broadcasting networks and, as such, controlled the information disseminated (EPW Engage, 2019).

(This paper draws extensively from Ramachandra Guha's book *India After Gandhi* (2017), with page numbers provided for specific references. It also refers to the first edition (2007) to elaborate on the themes 'People's Medium' and 'Cultural Reforms and the Language Debate' as this chapter was dropped in later edition)

1. Bridging Religious Divides after Gandhi's assassination
Radio had already played a central role in India's independence

movement, but the partition of India in 1947 marked a turning point in the usage of radio. On June 3, Mountbatten, back from London, announced the Partition plan on AIR. He was followed on the microphone by Nehru, Jinnah, and Baldev Singh representing the three largest communities to be affected by the impending violence that left millions dead, injured, and homeless (p 31). This broadcast was historic—it was the first time a massive political decision was shared with the entire nation via radio. The goal was to prepare the public for Partition and quell communal tensions. Barely a few months into independence, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on January 30, 1948. This was a moment of profound grief for India, already reeling from communal clashes. In the immediate aftermath, national leaders turned to AIR to communicate with the public as in the aftermath of partition radio became a lifeline for those caught in the violence and chaos. People relied on broadcasts to learn about safe migration routes and updates on communal riots. Radio announcements were also used to help families locate missing relatives during the mass migrations. The two tallest leaders, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru, delivered impassioned speeches that sought to calm the nation and prevent further communal violence. Guha notes that despite significant differences between Nehru and Patel just days before Gandhi's assassination, this discord was absent in their radio addresses. This indicates that despite their divergent approaches, when it came to communicating with the citizens of India on faceless medium of radio, the two leaders showed signs of maturity by not highlighting their variance at the hour when the nation was going through a lot of upheaval and mourning. Guha adds in the notes that the Patel spoke in Hindustani. This is of special significance because Patel as Information and Broadcasting minister was not in favour of Hindustani. The English translation taken from the Statesman (31 January, 1948), as quoted by read:

Patel appealed to the people not to think of revenge, but to carry the message of love and non-violence enunciated by Mahatmaji. It is a shame for us that the greatest man of the world has had to pay with his life for the sins which we have committed. We did not follow him when he was alive; let us at least follow his steps now he is dead. (pp. 22-23).

This broadcast was historic, as it was the first time such a significant political decision was conveyed to the entire nation. It was an attempt to prepare the public for the division of the country and to quell communal tensions. However, as partition unfolded, radio became a lifeline for those caught in the violence and chaos. In cities and villages alike, people relied on radio broadcasts to learn about safe migration routes and updates on communal riots. Families used radio announcements to locate missing relatives who had been displaced during the mass migrations.

The book does not talk about Nehru's speech after Gandhi's death, instead it refers to his speech in Allahabad after immersing Gandhi's ashes in the Ganga. Nehru said:

We have had our lesson at a terrible cost. Is there anyone

amongst us now who will not pledge himself after Gandhi's death to fulfil his mission . . . ?' Indians, said Nehru, had now 'to hold together and fight that terrible poison of communalism that has killed the greatest man of our age. (p. 23)

Nehru called on Indians to "hold together" and fight the "terrible poison of communalism" that had claimed Gandhi's life. These speeches reflect the maturity of the two leaders in addressing the urgent issues of the time and emphasized that national unity was the way forward when the nation was grappling with the twin shocks of partition and Gandhi's assassination (p. 23).

Through his address to the nation, which is often referred to by the title 'The light has gone out of our lives', Nehru urged people to abandon thoughts of revenge and to follow Gandhi's teachings of non-violence and love is not mentioned in the book. Though nothing much He emphasized that Gandhi's life had been taken due to the sins of the nation, but his message of love and unity should endure. In this 31 January address on AIR, Nehru condemned Gandhi's assassin as a "madman" and urged Indians to eradicate the societal "poison" that had fuelled such hate. He called on the nation to unite in remembrance of Gandhi's ideals, using the tragedy to inspire a secular, unified path forward for India. Similarly, Patel appealed to the people not to think of revenge but to carry forward the message of love and non-violence taught by Mahatma Gandhi. Patel expressed the shame of losing the greatest man in the world due to societal sins and urged the nation to follow Gandhi's steps after his death. Patel urged people to carry Gandhi's message of love and unity. Guha discusses these moments, noting their significance in addressing communal tensions and reinforcing the nation's commitment to Gandhi's ideals (p. 23).

Guha's book also omits Sarojini Naidu's speech either. In fact, Sarojini Naidu is not mentioned at all in the book, as one would have expected as she was the first woman president of Indian National Congress and a fighter for the rights of women. A quick glance at the 'My father do not rest' speech broadcast on AIR on 1st Feb 1948 shows that she invoked the spirit of unity as Gandhi's enduring message. She reflected on Gandhi's first fast in 1924, which had nationwide support for Hindu-Muslim unity, compared to his final fast, met with a divided nation filled with bitterness. Naidu lamented that Gandhi's death was caused by his own community's violent opposition, with a Hindu ultimately taking his life. For Naidu, Gandhi's death was a profound personal and spiritual loss, as her life had been deeply intertwined with his ideals for over three decades (Debs, 2013)

Debs adds that Gandhi's funeral was commemorated throughout India, broadcast live on the radio, and amplified in many cities through public loudspeakers. Three million people gathered for a Bombay memorial on Chowpatty Beach, described as the largest assembly seen there, timed to coincide with the cremation. Similar to Eyerman's (2001) observations about television's mediating role during John F. Kennedy Jr.'s assassination, radio broadcasts and public gatherings across India allowed for simultaneous public commemoration of Gandhi's funeral.

2. Princely states and political propaganda

In the early years of independent India, radio was used as a tool for ideological struggles by the princely states. One of the most prominent examples of this was the Nizam of Hyderabad's use of radio to oppose joining the Indian Union after independence. The Nizam used his radio station to broadcast "venomous propaganda" against the Indian government, calling for Hyderabad's independence (p. 55). His radio station became a mouthpiece for anti-Indian rhetoric. However, as tensions escalated, the Nizam eventually used the same medium to announce a ban on the Razakars (his private militia) and to express his willingness to reach an honorable settlement with India. These developments show how radio became a medium to reach the public, both for political communication and for what was seen as propaganda.

Before becoming part of India, tensions grew between Nehru's men and the Nizam of Hyderabad. There were allegations of gun-running from Pakistan to Hyderabad—using planes flown by British mercenaries—and of the import of arms from Eastern Europe. The prime minister of Madras wrote to Patel, stating that he found it difficult to cope with the flood of refugees from Hyderabad. K. M. Munshi sent lurid reports of the Nizam's actions, including his "fixed idea" of independence, his reference to the Government of India as "the scoundrels of Delhi," and the "venomous propaganda being carried out day and night through speeches" on the Nizam's radio (pp. 55-56).

AIR was strictly controlled by the government, ensuring that party propaganda was banned from the airwaves, but the Communist Party of India found a way around this restriction. During the 1951–52 general elections, the Communist Party utilized Moscow Radio to broadcast its messages. These broadcasts, relayed via Tashkent, depicted the non-communist parties as corrupt stooges of imperialist powers, portraying them as oppressors of the working class. This use of international radio demonstrated how powerful the medium could be in ideological battles, even after independence.

Speeches and posters were used by all parties, but only the communists had access to the airwaves. Not those transmitted by All-India Radio, which had banned party propaganda, but of Moscow Radio, which relayed its programs via stations in Tashkent. Indian listeners could, if they wished, hear how the non-communist parties in the election were 'corrupt stooges of Anglo-American imperialists and oppressors of the workers' (pp. 135-136).

There are also interesting examples of bilateral efforts to limit the use of radio space for national purposes. In the 1948 agreement between India and Pakistan, the parties promised that their respective publicity agents (including those for radio and film) would "refrain from and control: (a) propaganda against the other Dominion, and (b) publication of exaggerated versions of news of a character likely to inflame, or cause fear or alarm to, the population, or any section of the population in either Dominion" (p. 241).

3. Women's victims of partition and social healing

The aftermath of partition left deep scars on the social fabric of India, and one of the many sensitive issues was the abduction of women during the chaos. These women were separated from their family members. Nehru as the prime minister was deeply concerned about their plight. He used radio to directly address the issue through a broadcast that appealed to abducted women, assuring them that their virtue was not in question and that they would be welcomed back into society with respect and love. His message, broadcast to millions of listeners, played a critical role in fostering a sense of social responsibility and collective healing. It was also a significant moment in India's efforts to reintegrate women who had been victimized during the violence (p. 94).

In a radio broadcast to the refugees, the prime minister spoke especially 'to those women who are the victims of all these hardships.' He assured them that 'they should not feel that we have any hesitation whatsoever in bringing them back or that we have any doubts about their virtue. We want to bring them back with affection because it had not been their fault. They were forcefully abducted, and we want to bring them back respectfully and keep them lovingly. They must not doubt that they will come back to their families and be given all possible help'. (p. 94)

The use of radio to promote political and social articulations continued in the years following independence. For instance, radio played an active role in raising awareness about public health, literacy, electoral practices especially right to vote, contributing to the government's broader efforts at social reform.

4. Civic Awareness and Democratic Participation

The first general elections in independent India, held in 1951-52, were monumental tasks as this was a country that had only recently gained independence and had vast rural populations with low literacy rates. Therefore, educating citizens about the democratic process for a meaningful election was crucial. The Election Commission of India used radio extensively to disseminate information about the electoral process, the constitution, and the importance of voting. AIR broadcast numerous programs aimed at informing citizens about the novel exercise of democracy, helping to prepare them for their role as active participants in the world's largest democracy. AIR engaged citizens in state-building efforts by broadcasting programs in various Indian languages to explain government initiatives and foster public interest, such as a 1950 program highlighting the importance of equal rights and responsibilities under the Constitution (Indian Listener, 1950, p. 7).

In addition to radio, the Election Commission used documentary films to educate the public about the franchise, but radio's reach far exceeded that of cinema. With more than 3,000 cinemas screening educational documentaries, many more Indians were reached through radio broadcasts, which were accessible even in the most remote areas of the country. This mass outreach was critical in laying the foundation for India's democratic processes and ensuring that citizens were informed participants

in the electoral system. This way, radio reached out to the voters in spatially dispersed geographies of the country to ensure maximum awareness in this electoral exercise for meaningful representation in democratic governance.

Throughout 1951, the Election Commission used the media of film and radio to educate the public about this novel exercise in democracy. A documentary on the franchise and its functions, and the duties of the electorate, was shown in more than 3,000 cinemas. Many more Indians were reached via AIR which broadcast numerous programmes on the constitution, the purpose of adult franchise, the preparation of electoral rolls, and the process of voting. (p. 133)

AIR served as a vital government tool for informing the public on national issues, promoting unity, and broadcasting India's perspective internationally. In the 1952 elections, the Election Commission used AIR to educate citizens on democratic processes, contributing to high voter turnout and a successful, fair election.

By the third general election, it was still being debated whether or not to allow time on AIR to political parties. Some of the discussion points rallied around the fact that broadcasts by political parties were expected to uphold high decorum, avoiding offensive language and limiting discussions to party policies rather than individual candidates. Propaganda based on religion, race, caste, or community was strictly prohibited, and no negative remarks were allowed regarding foreign countries with friendly relations to India (Jain, 1991).

5. Foreign Affairs and India's Identity

For India to secure its place among democratic and secular nations, its early leaders had to overcome the deep imprint of colonial rule on the national psyche and challenge the West's perception of India as overpopulated, impoverished, and burdened by its culture of religion and caste (Myrdal, 1968).

As India transitioned from colonial rule to an independent republic, radio played a pivotal role in shaping the country's foreign policy narrative. Nehru's broadcasts on foreign affairs underscored India's approach to international relations. Even before independence (1946) in a radio broadcast, Nehru had highlighted the importance of the United States, the Soviet Union, and China to India's future, setting the tone for the country's non-aligned stance during the Cold War. This position later became a hallmark of India's foreign policy, as the country sought to maintain its sovereignty in a world divided by superpower rivalry.

Nehru was jailed for his part in the Quit India movement of 1942. When he was released in July 1945, his energies were devoted to the endgames of the empire. But after it became clear that India would soon be free, his thoughts turned once more to foreign affairs. In a radio broadcast of September 1946, he singled out the United States, the Soviet Union, and China as the three countries most relevant to India's future. The next year he spoke in the

Constituent Assembly on how India would be friends with both the US and the USSR, rather than become camp followers of one power 'in the hope that some crumbs might fall from their table.' As he put it, 'we lead ourself' (pp. 149-150)

An instance of India's shifting perspectives on China is highlighted where Patel urged Nehru to strengthen India's defenses in light of the growing threat from China and suggested that India reconsider advocating for China's entry into the UN. He also proposed reevaluating India's relationships with major powers, hinting at a potential shift away from non-alignment towards an alliance with the West.

This latter shift was advocated more vigorously by the journalist D. F. Karaka. Like Patel, Karaka was appalled by Pannikar's carelessness. (Apparently, the ambassador did not hear about the Chinese invasion until it was announced on AIR) The annexation of Tibet had shown that the Himalayas were no longer impregnable. And the Indian army lacked the equipment or training to take on a determined and focused enemy. (p.166)

AIR's broadcasting services were effective in making Indian citizens aware of the country's position and importance in the world, and her external relations with friends and foes (Kripalani, 2018)

The engagement with foreign issues often required the instilling of faith in nation and nationalism. On radio, even film music often carried patriotic themes, especially during times of external threat, with songs like *Kar Chale Hum Fida* and *Ae Watan Ae Watan* honoring the valor and sacrifice of soldiers defending the nation. Popular anthems such as *Rang De Basanti Chola* and *Mere Desh Ki Dharti* became national symbols of love for the homeland, resonating through radio broadcasts and embedding themselves in the national consciousness (Kripalani, 2017)

Kripalani further adds that AIR news programs featured world ideas through diverse commentary and discussions, with topics spanning social welfare, science, and culture, and guests including global intellectuals like Aldous Huxley, Yuri Gagarin, and Dag Hammarskjöld. India's post-independence non-violent freedom struggle attracted admiration from world leaders such as Che Guevara, Kwame Nkrumah, and John F. Kennedy, whose mutual respect for Nehru was echoed in broadcasts that strengthened India's international presence.

6. Communicating National Development

Radio was also used to communicate important national development initiatives. In 1952, on Gandhi's birthday, Nehru launched fifty-five Indo-US community development projects through a radio broadcast. These projects, which focused on rural development through initiatives such as building roads, wells, and promoting cattle welfare, were aimed at fostering a rural revolution by peaceful means. Radio was the most effective way to communicate the goals of these projects to the wider population, ensuring that citizens were aware of the government's efforts to improve their lives.

The industrial bias of Indian planning was tempered by a range of programmes promoting agrarian uplift. On the morning of 2 October 1952 (Mahatma Gandhi's birthday), the president of India inaugurated a nationwide series of community development programmes with a broadcast over the radio. Fifty-five projects were launched across India that day, these funded jointly by the governments of India and the United States. Among the schemes to be promoted by community development were roads and wells, cattle welfare and improved methods of cultivation. (pp. 213-214)

Frank Moraes (1958) writes that in a country like India, characterized by limited economic growth and abundant labor, Gandhi believed that small-scale industries and handicrafts should complement larger industries. He championed the *charkha*, or spinning wheel, as a symbol of self-sufficiency and a means to achieve *swaraj*, likely disapproving of the emphasis on heavy industrialization in post-independence Five-Year Plans. These plans prioritized modern machinery and power projects over his village-centered economic philosophy. He quotes Nehru who said that 'power is the foundation of all development today'.

7. A People's Entertainment

Guha in the first edition of the book (2007) talks about how radio emerged as people's entertainment, highlighting its rapid rise in popularity, reflected in the surge of radio sets manufactured. In 1947, only 3,000 sets were produced, but by 1956, the number had risen to 1,50,000. By 1962, AIR had become a monopoly, broadcasting from 30 stations with an annual output of 100,000 hours. AIR reached nearly the entire subcontinent, with only remote areas like jungles, mountains, and deserts remaining beyond its coverage. However the chapter on entertainment is missing in the revised edition (2017). According to Kripalani (2018), AIR emerged as the sole source of news, views, knowledge and entertainment for the Indian audience in the early years of Independence. He adds that Hindi radio plays series like *Modi ke Matwale Rahi* (mystery), *Hawa Mahal* (comedy) and *Dhol ki Pol* (political comedy created to boost morale during the Chinese invasion of 1962) were some of the very popular programmes on AIR in the entertainment category.

Guha writes:

The state's hopes for radio were expressed by a leading nationalist politician as 'not only to give entertainments but to give such programmes as will give enlightenment and elevation of spirit to the villagers'. Most stations began broadcasting at dawn, with a hymn of invocation, ending at midnight with a weather report. The programmes interspersed music – classical, film and folk – with stories, plays, news bulletins and special shows for women, children and rural listeners. Education in health and farming methods was also provided. It was a very mixed brew, allowing listeners to pick and choose according to their tastes and needs. (First Edition).

Asthana critiques the ideological underpinnings of Indian broadcasting, arguing that the colonial framework of centralized

control and cultural essentialism persisted in postcolonial India. Broadcasting under the ruling elite's brand of nationalism, he notes, reflected upper-caste, class-Hindu perspectives and diverged from the inclusive nationalism of the anti-colonial movement. Strict bureaucratic controls enforced a formal, Sanskritized Hindi, distancing radio from everyday Indians. In contrast, popular films embraced Hindustani—a blend of Hindi and Urdu—better reflecting the diverse cultural and linguistic fabric of the nation.

8. Cultural 'Reforms' and the Language Debate

The cultural influence of radio extended far beyond the language debate to assume a cultural scheme of hierarchy in the hands of B.V. Keskar, who succeeded Patel (and R R Diwakar) as India's Information and Broadcasting Minister and served for almost a decade. He imagined radio as a tool to reshape the nation's auditory preferences and designed policies accordingly. He famously banned Hindi film music from AIR, describing it as vulgar and a blend of Western and Indian influences he considered irrational. Keskar aimed to replace film songs with classical and folk music as part of a larger effort to elevate the cultural consciousness of the nation. Radio thus became a pivotal platform for debates over the national language and cultural identity, contentious issues in post-independence India.

Guha notes Keskar's disdain for modern musical variants:

For a decade after Independence, the Union minister in charge of information and broadcasting was Dr. B.V. Keskar, a scholar with a deep interest in classical Indian culture combined with a lofty disdain for its modern variants. In a speech in 1953, he noted that classical music had fallen on bad days and was on the point of extinction in North India. Classical music had lost touch with the masses, not due to the fault of the public, but because of historical circumstances. In the past, it was patronized by princes and sardars, but that support has almost ended. During the last 150 years we were under the British who would not understand and support Hindustani music... The main problem before musicians and AIR is to revive public contact with classical music. We must make them familiar with our traditional music and make them more intimate with it. (Guha, 2007)

Although Keskar initially banned Hindi film songs from AIR, their popularity prompted the launch of Vividh Bharati in 1957, a channel dedicated to popular film music. Its immense success led to significant growth for AIR, which became one of the largest broadcasting organizations in the world. The station's commercial success through advertising revenue was instrumental in sustaining AIR operations. However, while music programming flourished, news bulletins were less appealing due to their propagandist tone and monotonous delivery, reflecting the ruling party's perspectives.

Keskar's broader cultural agenda included promoting classical and folk music to counteract the growing dominance of film songs. Alonso observes that Keskar saw Hindi film music as a threat to Indian classical music's survival and that his campaign to reshape India's soundscape aimed to construct a national

identity (p.102). However, Alonso also highlights that Hindi film music played a crucial role in sustaining radio in India through Vividh Bharti. Kesar's efforts focused on promoting a Sanskritized national language stripped of Arabic and Persian influence (p.87). Guha does not delve into these linguistic debates and how AIR steered through the popular sentiments of the times as he discusses different forms of entertainment like television and cinema as well in the chapter. However there are enough instances in different chapters of Guha's book that highlight how the people of India were a divided lot and language divide was one of the many that existed in the Nehru years, and even later. Many of these have been discussed by Guha in the chapter 'Redrawing the maps' (pp. 177-197).

CONCLUSION:

In the Nehru era, All India Radio emerged as a unifying force, bridging divides in a newly independent, diverse, and often fragmented nation. By serving as a medium for mass communication, AIR played a pivotal role in shaping India's political, social, and cultural landscape. Whether addressing communal tensions, facilitating democratic education, or communicating development agendas, radio became the voice of the nation. Nehru's speeches on AIR emphasized secularism, unity, and modernization, while also addressing the challenges of a nascent republic.

Radio's reach, combined with its ability to convey authoritative yet empathetic messaging, made it an indispensable tool for political communication. As reflected in Guha's *India After Gandhi*, AIR's influence during Nehru's leadership extended beyond information dissemination—it helped construct the idea of India as a resilient, inclusive, and forward-looking nation.

Notes:

About the book *India After Gandhi* (Revised Edition published by Picador India in 2017)

India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy is a non-fiction work by Indian historian Ramachandra Guha, first published in August 2007 by HarperCollins. The book explores India's history following its independence from British rule in 1947. It examines the nation's political, social, and economic developments over the decades. In 2017, a revised and expanded edition was released, incorporating additional insights and events. Guha's work provides a comprehensive narrative of India's post-independence journey.

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